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Using AI in Humanitarian Work

A practical guide to deciding what to enter, trust and share

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Purpose

Generative AI can help humanitarian teams organise ideas, draft text and explore options. It can also expose sensitive information, manufacture plausible claims and obscure who made a decision. This guide helps programme and support staff make a defensible choice before using a tool, while reviewing its output and before sharing the result. It focuses on everyday professional tasks, not on the procurement or deployment of AI systems.

The central rule is simple: the person using AI remains responsible for the information provided to the tool and for any action taken on its output. Follow your organisation's policies, applicable law, contractual duties and sector safeguards. Where these are unclear, pause and ask the relevant data protection, safeguarding or technical lead.

1 Decide whether AI is appropriate for the task

Start with the consequence of an error. Generating headings for a public training agenda differs from drafting a protection referral, classifying households for assistance or interpreting a disclosure of violence. The higher the potential effect on a person's rights, safety or access to services, the stronger the case for specialist review and for keeping the decision entirely with qualified people.

Lower exposure examples	Higher exposure examples
Brainstorming a structure for a public report; editing a non-sensitive paragraph; turning an approved public document into discussion questions.	Entering identifiable case notes; interpreting sensitive interview data; ranking people for assistance; producing an unreviewed referral, eligibility or safeguarding decision.

A useful first question is: what would be lost if we did this without AI? If the benefit is small but the possible harm is serious, use the established process instead.

2 Check the material before entering anything

Treat the prompt, attachments, images and conversation history as information you are disclosing to a separate system. Do not assume that a paid account, a privacy setting or removal of names makes the

material safe. A rare combination of location, age, role and event may identify someone; a supposedly anonymous extract may also reveal staff, partners or witnesses.

Before uploading, establish whether the tool is authorised for this category of information, who can access the inputs and outputs, whether data are retained or used for further processing, and whether a safer approved environment exists. Obtain guidance on consent and lawful handling where needed; consent alone does not resolve every protection risk.

- Remove details unnecessary for the task. Test the task first with fictional or aggregated information.
- Do not enter case records, beneficiary lists, unpublished incident reports, identity documents, medical information or confidential donor and partner material into an unapproved service.
- Consider people indirectly identified by a story, quotation, photograph, location or combination of facts.

3 Verify claims in proportion to the harm of getting them wrong

An AI answer may sound authoritative while inventing a statistic, citation, donor requirement, legal rule or organisational policy. Ask for the source, then open and check the source itself. A citation supplied by the tool is a lead to verify, not evidence on its own. For a proposal or situation report, check figures against dated primary sources, confirm the geographical and time coverage, and distinguish an observation from an inference.

When data conflict, document the discrepancy rather than asking the model to settle it. Ask a technical colleague to review interpretations outside your expertise. Never present AI-generated estimates as measured needs, verified incidents or community views.

4 Preserve human judgement and community voice

AI can speed up synthesis, but it cannot establish what affected people meant, whether a translation preserves a sensitive nuance, or whether a recommendation is feasible in the local setting. Review possible bias: whose accounts were collected, who was absent, what language was used, and what assumptions the tool has introduced. Decisions about assistance, protection, complaints or referrals need the authorised human process and an accountable decision-maker.

A useful review question is: would I be able to explain this choice to a colleague, a partner and the people affected without referring to the model as the reason? If not, the reasoning needs more work.

5 Review the final product before sharing

Check accuracy, confidentiality, tone, attribution and permissions. For images and stories, avoid fabricating a person's experience or creating a scene that could be mistaken for documentary evidence. Label illustrative AI-generated material clearly when its nature matters to the audience. Check rights and licence conditions for any third-party material used as an input or included in the output; the tool's ability to reproduce text or images does not grant permission to publish them.

Keep a proportionate record of the tool used, the task, the source documents consulted, significant human changes and the person who approved the final version. Record enough to reconstruct an important decision without retaining sensitive prompts unnecessarily.

Three situations from humanitarian practice

A Summarising community interviews



Illustrative scene Ai generated

A MEAL officer wants to paste interview transcripts into a public chatbot to identify common concerns. The transcripts omit names but include a small village, family relationships and a distinctive incident. The officer does not upload them. The team first reviews the approved data environment and protection requirements, then considers whether a de-identified thematic summary prepared by staff can support a limited AI task. A bilingual colleague checks any resulting themes against the original material and the interview context.

B Drafting a donor proposal



Illustrative scene AI generated

A programme manager asks AI to propose a theory of change based on public needs assessments and a fictional project scenario. This may be a useful starting point. Before submission, the team verifies every needs figure, tests activities against staff capacity and access constraints, confirms donor conditions in the current call and obtains technical review. No generated claim is treated as evidence merely because it reads well.

C Creating communication material



Illustrative scene AI generated

A communications officer considers generating a realistic picture of a distribution. A viewer might read it as a photograph of an actual response. The officer uses an approved real image with documented permissions or chooses a clearly identified illustration. Any accompanying story is based on verified, consented material and does not combine details in a way that exposes an individual.

A five-minute decision review

Question	If the answer is no or unclear
Is the task permitted under our policies and does it add a useful benefit?	Pause or use the existing workflow.
Are all inputs appropriate for this specific tool and purpose?	Remove, replace or withhold the material; seek advice.
Could an error or disclosure harm someone?	Increase expert review or avoid the tool.
Can we independently verify important claims and preserve context?	Do not use the output as a factual basis yet.
Is a named person accountable for approval and documentation?	Assign one before sharing or acting.

How to use this resource

Use the questions as a short team discussion before a new AI use case. Adapt them to your organisation's policy, the operating context and the sensitivity of the work. This guide does not replace legal advice, a data protection assessment, safeguarding procedures, technical standards or organisational approval.

Further reading

IASC. Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action (2023). https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/iasc-operational-guidance-data-responsibility-humanitarian-action

ICRC. Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action, second edition. https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/430501-handbook-data-protection-humanitarian-action-second-edition

ICRC. Building a Responsible Humanitarian Approach: The ICRC's Policy on Artificial Intelligence (2024). https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/building-responsible-humanitarian-approach-icrcs-policy-artificial-intelligence

UNHCR. UNHCR AI Approach (2025). https://www.unhcr.org/digitalstrategy/ai-approach/